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**Worship, Technology and Identity:  
A Deaf Protestant Congregation in Urban China**

**ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>**

This paper analyses a hearing-impaired Protestant community in urban China and explores the extent to which this particular community has its own contextualised Protestant message centred on understandings of sin as a disability. The construction of this message is based on a shared identity as both Deaf and Protestant and is mediated through a shared practice of signing and a common written language (Chinese). Circulation of this message is facilitated by technology and social media. Based on ethnographic data generated in a Deaf congregation in Yantai, Shandong province, I argue that while the message of this particular group is highly contextualised, the community has both national and transnational ties, linking it to a range of Protestant groups both within and outside mainland China. This paper furthers our understanding of how Christian identity is shaped in contemporary China.

**Key words:** sign language; Chinese Sign Language; Deaf education; Deaf culture; Protestantism; worship; technology; identity

## INTRODUCTION

I arrive at the Shengli Road Church<sup>2</sup> compound on a warm spring afternoon and make my way through the gates. There are a few elderly ‘sisters’ chatting in the small courtyard. I enter one of the rooms under the main sanctuary to attend the ‘Deaf<sup>3</sup> gathering’ (*longren juhui*). This group of predominantly Deaf and hearing-impaired Protestant<sup>4</sup> Christians and some non-Christians is not officially regarded as a ‘church’ (*jiaohui*) by the Shengli Road Church leadership and nor do the participants view themselves as such. However, as a well-defined and tightly-knit group, it operates almost entirely independently from the Shengli Road Three-Self-affiliated congregation and the leadership is entirely Deaf. I therefore refer to the group as a Deaf congregation throughout this article.

The Deaf congregation meets weekly on Sunday afternoons for worship (*libai*) at the same time as one of the three Sunday gatherings of the Shengli Road congregation which take place in the main sanctuary.<sup>5</sup> As I arrive and take a seat on one of the wooden benches, several of the ‘brothers and sisters’ (*dixiongzimei*) are setting up the screen for the digital projector at the front of the room. More people start to arrive and Sister Du who helps to lead the congregation comes through the door, smiling, as always. She signs a greeting to me and then moves around the room greeting others. Sister Du was born deaf and plays a central role in this Deaf community, always taking time to make people feel welcome. More people arrive and many of them are chatting via sign. Making people feel welcomed and included is important to the members of the congregation and it is rare indeed to see people sitting alone. Some of the conversations are quite animated and sometimes people bang the wooden benches or clap their hands – all part of the communication repertoires in this community.<sup>6</sup> Brother Piao, a young South Korean, has also turned up and is actively having signed conversations around the room. He is fluent in Korean and Chinese Sign Languages. A hearer, he has excellent spoken Chinese, having studied and lived in China for several years in order to help the Deaf community in China. There are a good number of young people. By two o’clock, about thirty-five people have joined the gathering.

Worship begins when the characters ‘pray individually in your heart’ (*modao*) are projected on the screen. People bow their heads. These personal prayers are not signed. After a couple of minutes, the characters ‘pray’ (*daogao*) are projected on the screen and Sister Du stands up and signs a prayer at the front so as to be visible to everyone. Everyone in the congregation keeps their eyes open to follow the prayer. Song lyrics for ‘All praise and worship [to Him]’

(*yiqie gesong zanmei*) appear on the screen and everyone stands to sign the song. The signing is not entirely uniform and this is because not everyone is fluent in Chinese Sign Language (CSL *Zhongguo shouyu*). Some sign in other sign dialects or sign idiolects and some use signed Chinese<sup>7</sup> or a combination of all the above. The congregation signs another song, with the lyrics appearing on the screen. They then sign the Apostle's Creed (*shitu xinjing*) after the characters 'Declaration of faith' (*xuangao xinyang*) appear on the screen. They follow the text of the Apostle's Creed, signing as before, only this time the signing is more uniform, since this is signed every week.

A talk follows after the characters 'sermon' (*zhengdao*) are projected on the screen. Brother Xie, a Deaf Yantai local, stands up to preach. He became deaf at the age of seven after being prescribed an overdose of ototoxic antibiotics (*erduxing kangshengsu*) for a serious fever, a common cause of deafness in children in China and Taiwan (see Callaway 2000; Ann 2003). Brother Xie is fluent in Chinese Sign Language and was being theologically trained by South Korean missionaries together with several other Deaf Chinese Christians when I first met him in 2009. His sermons are always very well illustrated on the screen with vivid images, clear headings, bullet points, and biblical references. The outlines of the sermons are generally so clear that those with little or no sign language can follow the message. Today he talks about the idea of 'worldly disability' (*shushide canji*) and contrasts it with 'spiritual disability' (*shulingde canji*), referring to 2 Timothy 1.13-14 where Paul exhorts Timothy to adhere to 'sound teaching' and protect the gift of the Holy Spirit. His message is based on the idea that sin causes spiritual disability in all people, and therefore all need God's grace. Brother Xie is very expressive, and the forty-five-minute sermon seems to take no time at all. Throughout the sermon, members of the congregation sign to one another to clarify meaning. They even sometimes interact with Brother Xie to ask questions to enhance their understanding. The gatherings are generally much more interactive than the hearing gatherings at Shengli Road Church. At the end, Brother Xie signs a prayer. Sister Zhang makes some announcements about upcoming events before they sign two more songs ('Renew my Mind' *gengxin wo xinyi* and 'The Treasured Cross' *baobei shijia*) following the lyrics on the screen. The gathering then finishes as usual with the signing of the 'Lord's prayer' (*Zhudaowen*) with eyes open and then many people hang around sharing snacks and chatting.

What I have just presented is one aspect of my research on this Deaf Christian community in Yantai, Shandong province (China) since 2009, involving participant observation in the

Sunday worship gatherings and interviews with members of the Deaf congregation. I have been seeking to grasp how this community understands the Christian message in its particular context. I am not competent in any form of sign language and have relied on translators (such as Brother Piao, mentioned above), email and social media messaging to generate data. To protect participant identities, all names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Yantai (previously known as Chefoo) is located in the east of Shandong province, northern China and has a population of seven million (including rural counties). Yantai has four city districts and eight counties or county-level towns (YSYC 2017). Yantai's industrial output is second only to Qingdao in the province and fishing, agriculture and tourism are important sectors in its economy. The port was forcibly opened to foreign trade following the second Opium War (1856-1860). As a result, Yantai developed as a centre for foreign business, and became a hub for Protestant missionary endeavours along with nearby Penglai, formerly known as Dengzhou (Tengchow). Foreign mission agencies established hospitals, schools and churches in the city in the same way they did in many parts of China. A major player in the missionary endeavour in Yantai was the Presbyterian Church of the USA (Cliff 1998). After 1949, many churches were merged or closed, and only a small number were permitted to function openly. The remaining churches were shut down in the 1960s and began to re-open in the early 1980s (Zheng 1993). Today, Yantai has a number of Three-Self-affiliated congregations and several active unregistered 'urban churches.' Due to the closeness of the Shandong peninsula to South Korea, there is a significant resident Korean population in Yantai and two Korean churches<sup>8</sup> have been established in the city.

China has the largest Deaf population in the world and questions surrounding Deaf identity in the Chinese context, are therefore highly relevant. There are indeed, 'many ways to be deaf' (Nakamura 2006, 192), but to date, the literature on deafness in China has predominantly focused on Deaf children, particularly in relation to Deaf education, schooling and 'rehabilitation' (for example, Ye 1990; Callaway 1999; Callaway 2000; Johnson 2003; Lytle *et al* 2006; Liang and Mason 2013; He 2016; Wang and Andrews 2017). The lived experiences of deafness in the adult Deaf population has largely been ignored, so this paper makes an original (if somewhat exploratory) contribution to the literature on deafness and Deaf identity in China. In this paper I will argue that the Deaf congregation in Yantai has a highly-contextualised understanding of the Christian message which is communicated both through signing and written Chinese in a particular approach to worship. This message

challenges dominant narratives of disability and deafness, facilitating a shared identity with a potentially transformative effect.

‘Deafness’ (*tingli canji*) in the People’s Republic of China is one of the five official categories of disability.<sup>9</sup> Approaches to and definitions of disability in the PRC are not static but the term currently used in official discourse and in society more widely is *canji*, in which *can* means ‘broken,’ ‘incomplete’ or ‘defective’ and the *ji* means ‘disease,’ ‘illness’ or ‘sickness,’ clearly promoting very negative perceptions of disability. In relation to deafness or hearing impairment, it is commonly believed that Deaf people are ‘broken’ and in need of being ‘fixed.’ In 1990 the Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Disabled Persons was published (and then revised in 2008), due mainly to the activism of the China Disabled Persons Federation<sup>10</sup> (*Zhongguo canjiren lianhehui*). This was a step forward in official approaches to disability generally and to deafness specifically. However, deafness in China is still widely perceived as a ‘disease,’ ‘abnormality’ or ‘medical defect,’ and such perceptions encourage ‘rehabilitation’ (*kangfu*) from a young age in an attempt to make deaf children more like hearing children (Li 2014). This has largely taken the form of an oralist approach in specialist schools for the deaf (see below).

I will first briefly provide a context for the rest of the paper by considering the advent and development of Deaf education in Yantai, beginning in the late nineteenth century. The discussion will consider the oralist approach to teaching the Deaf and the significance of sign language for Deaf identity. I will then briefly trace the history of the Deaf congregation before discussing some of the major implications of the congregation as a Deaf community.

## YANTAI AND THE POLITICS OF DEAF EDUCATION

Founded by foreign missionaries in the late-nineteenth century, the Yantai School for the Deaf was China’s first institution for specialist Deaf education. Located in the centre of Yantai, it is now called the Yantai Deaf Centre School (*Yantaishi longya zhongxin xuexiao*). The school still claims its history back to 1887 when Annetta Thompson Mills (1853-1929), of the Presbyterian Church of the USA, began work among deaf boys (CYHR 1994, 1397b).<sup>11</sup> In late Qing China, it was commonly believed that the Deaf were possessed by evil spirits and were often mistreated (Mills 1905b, 190), so providing an education for Deaf

children was highly significant. The Yantai School for the Deaf is relevant to our discussion because it had a significant impact on approaches to deaf education and sign language in Yantai and across China which have endured until today.

Annetta Mills' adoption of an oralist approach to deaf education was informed by her previous training and by the outcome of the Milan Conference of 1880, which promoted oralism in schools for the deaf in Europe and North America (see Monaghan 2003, 4). Oralism advocates teaching deaf children to speak the majority language and Annetta focused on teaching her students written and spoken Chinese, and lip-reading (Mills 1905a 462). She did not use sign language but employed Bell's 'Visible Speech' and drew on the Lyon Phonetic Manual to develop a fingerspelling system<sup>12</sup> which she published in 1908 (Zhou 1980). The school communicated this approach to the teachers it trained who later worked in other parts of China (Shanghai, Beijing, Nantong and Chengdu) – and further afield in places such as Korea (Carter 1910) – as more schools were established. The school was nationalised in 1952 and maintained an oralist approach following a 1954 national conference on teaching the deaf which advocated for a continued adherence to oralism (Lytle *et al* 2006, 458c). Today, and in line with the national programme, deaf children in Yantai are subject to oralist 'rehabilitation' focusing on hearing recovery, speech development, and lip-reading and supplemented with signed Chinese and/or fingerspelling which follow the syntax of written or spoken Chinese (CMHR 2012, 689a). This is not sign language. Those deemed to be 'rehabilitated' enter the mainstream schooling system and those who are not attend specialist deaf schools (see Wang and Andrews 2017, 63b).

The negative effects of oralism are widely recognised in the literature (see Ladd 2003). Not only are deaf people expected to 'fit in' with the broader hearing population, they are also further disenfranchised because they are deprived of an education taught in sign language, a central element of Deaf identity (Ladd 2003; Breivik 2005; Nakamura 2006). In addition, oralism is generally not an effective approach and often results in poor lip-reading skills and imprecise speech, leaving deaf people with an inability to communicate effectively outside of the classroom (Wrigley 1997, 22). Deaf children who learn sign language early on function cognitively, linguistically and socially at levels appropriate to their development (Mahshie 1995, xiv). Although there is an increasing recognition of the importance of sign language in China and a retreat from a strict adherence to oralism,<sup>13</sup> barriers to the development and use of a standardised and effective Chinese Sign Language (CSL) persist.<sup>14</sup> Despite sign language

being accepted as an official language in 1990, and recent media attention surrounding the publication of standardised CSL signs (China Daily 2018), the dominant view is that sign language is not a language or that it is merely signed Chinese.

However, despite a long adherence to oralism in Deaf education in Yantai (as with other locations in China) and the problems associated with it, the Deaf have developed sign language, built their own networks and established their own community. Yantai's various Deaf education institutions provided a context for the mushrooming of important elements of Deaf culture, providing the basis for the Deaf congregation. The importance of Deaf schools as an environment for the development of natural sign languages is well established (see Ladd 2003; Nakamura 2006). Linguists recognise that sign communications which develop within Deaf communities are natural language systems and 'cultural systems in which not just the output signal but also the processes for forming words and sentences operate without any connection to speech or sound' (Stokoe 1980, 365). Schools are often the first places deaf children encounter sign language and receive a name sign since few deaf are born into deaf families (Wrigley 1997, 21; Yau and He 1989, 306). The deaf schools provided a context for the development of a Deaf network which Deaf converts later utilised to spread the Christian message. We turn now to trace the foundation and development of the Deaf congregation.

## **THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF THE YANTAI DEAF CONGREGATION**

It is in a social context which marginalised the deaf and discriminated against the use of sign language that the Yantai Deaf congregation was born and then expanded. The Protestant Deaf community traces its beginnings to the conversion of one Deaf man, Brother Liu, in the mid-1980s.<sup>15</sup> Brother Liu made his living from repairing bicycles in the centre of Yantai. An 'overseas Chinese' (*huaqiao*) businessman (name unknown) who frequented Yantai in the 1980s built a friendship with Brother Liu after Liu repaired his bicycle. A Christian, this businessman gave Brother Liu a New Testament. Brother Liu converted to Protestantism. Liu introduced Deaf friends to the businessman and several more were converted. When the businessman stopped coming to Yantai, they lost touch, but Brother Liu and the other Deaf Christians met together for bible study and utilised their existing Deaf networks in the city to share their faith. These networks included those established through the Deaf schools in Zhifu and Fushan districts and the Deaf vendors of 'steamed rice cakes' (*zhengxuegao*). More Deaf



people became Christians.

Brother Liu passed away in the mid-1990s, but the group of Deaf Christians continued meeting together. Some of them attended worship gatherings at Qishan Church, a Three-Self-affiliated congregation also near the centre of Yantai. These Deaf Christians met Sister Jiang, the wife of a young preacher. Sister Jiang began to learn sign language, and once she became proficient, she met with the Deaf Christians in the room where she lived with her husband.<sup>16</sup> The group then became too large for Jiang's room, so she sought permission for the group to use a room in Qishan Church. In the mid-2000s, the group outgrew that room and Jiang arranged for them to use a room in Shengli Road Church where the Deaf congregation continued to meet until 2015.<sup>17</sup> From the mid-2000s, and inspired by Sister Jiang, a number of Protestant hearing university students began to learn Chinese Sign Language and started to attend the Deaf congregation. The congregation is made up largely of young people, and then some middle-aged and a few elderly - there are few children as a result. The congregation serves as an important network for support and the members often spend time together outside of the Sunday worship gathering.

There are two important aspects of the congregation which need to be elaborated upon. Firstly, as mentioned in passing in the Introduction to the article, the Deaf congregation is Deaf-led and functions independently from Shengli Road Church. The Deaf congregation is not formally registered with the local state as a separate congregation and, because until 2015 it was meeting in a registered site for religious activities (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*), there was no perceived need for the congregation to seek separate registration. The leaders of the congregation certainly did not fear being shut down by the authorities because they have (informal) ties to the Shengli Road Church leadership, which are facilitated by Sister Jiang. The main exception to the Deaf congregation's autonomy from Shengli Road Church is the role the senior leadership plays in administering communion and conducting baptisms. As found in Three-Self-affiliated congregations across China, only ordained pastors (*mushi*) and elders (*zhanglao*), oversee communion and baptise converts. The pastor or one of the elders leads the Deaf congregation in celebrating communion several times a year, but there is no established schedule. Deaf converts are baptised together with hearing converts at the annual baptism gathering. The congregation does not view itself as either being or having been 'Three-Self' or 'house church' and the leadership insists on self-referring as a 'gathering' (*juhui*) rather than a 'church' (*jiaohui*) or a 'fellowship' (*tuangqi*).

In 2008, the Deaf congregation was gifted a digital media projector to facilitate their worship gatherings. This, together with PowerPoint, has revolutionised their worship because the leaders can utilise written Chinese as well as images and other graphics to help communicate biblical passages, messages, songs and other liturgy to the congregation whose heterogeneous membership uses different sign languages with different levels of competency. While all the members of the congregation have a common experience of signing, the nature of this signing is diverse: there are, in fact, many sign languages in China. CSL – which itself has two main dialects<sup>18</sup> – is broadly based on written Chinese, with two signs for one word (following two characters for one word) (Callaway 2000, 82), but it differs from the ‘signed Chinese’ used in schools for the deaf which follows the syntax of written Chinese (Wang and Andrews 2017, 64a). At the same time, CSL differs from ‘natural’ sign languages developed and used by the Deaf in their everyday lives (Lin *et al* 2009, 328). Sign languages have regional dialects and idiolects and there are differences in their grammars, word-signing and ‘manual markers’ (such as brow raises or frowns) (Nakamura 2006, 16; Fischer and Gong 2010, 507). In the Yantai Deaf congregation, for example, some people sign in CSL fluently, some use a natural sign language, and some use a combination of CSL and natural sign. Others combine sign language with gestures developed at home with their parents, or fingerspelling. Still others use sign and writing to communicate. When members of the congregation follow written texts such as biblical passages or song lyrics, they typically use signed Chinese because the grammar of written Chinese differs from CSL or natural sign languages (see Monaghan 1991, 443 for a similar observation in a Deaf church in the US).

It has long been recognised that Deaf people are very adept at communicating across sign languages and sign dialects (Stokoe 1980, 366; Kyle and Woll 1995, 24-25). Research conducted in Deaf churches in South Africa emphasises the importance for some Deaf converts of the Christian message being communicated in sign language before they could have a personal encounter with God (Smit 2010, 515b). However, communicating to one another is only part of the overall worship experience in this Deaf congregation: the importance of the *participatory* element of worship in order for it to be meaningful in Deaf contexts has been highlighted in other studies (see Morris 2016, 123). The projection of textual sources onto the screen which the congregation signs as a collective and comprises both an established liturgy (for example, the Apostles Creed and the Lord’s Prayer are presented and signed at every worship gathering) as well as biblical passages, prayers and songs which change with each gathering, helps to form a shared religious aesthetic. The

shared worship experience helps to bind the participants together and build a sense of belonging and community, especially for those who lack a sense of belonging elsewhere (Smiler and McKee 2007, 96a).

Many of the more committed members of the Deaf congregation are very active in proselytising among the wider Deaf community in Yantai (and beyond) both in face-to-face interactions and via social media. The Internet, and social media in particular, is helping to connect Deaf people (see Lytle *et al* 2006, 468a). The high use of mobile phones and social media technology among the members of the Deaf congregation, which allows for both textual messages and video calling through which signing can be used, has not only facilitated an increase in a sense of community and belonging, but has also aided their proselytization efforts. These efforts have clearly been effective and the congregation now has about seventy members, although there are usually never more than forty at the worship gatherings. It remains one of the few such congregations in the province and the leaders of the group think that it is possibly one of the largest Deaf congregations in China.<sup>19</sup> There is no fear of authorities interfering in their proselytizing efforts since when members of the congregation are out on the streets ‘spreading the gospel’ (*chuan fuyin*) to other Deaf people, no one else can understand their signing so the state remains unaware of their activities. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, Sister Jiang is utilising her contacts with churches and foreigners to secure funding in order to help some of the Deaf Protestants who have leadership potential to be coached either in China – like Brother Xie – or abroad for Deaf theological training.

### **A DEAF-PROTESTANT IDENTITY**

So far in this paper I have traced the birth and growth of the Yantai Deaf congregation and placed it in its specific sociohistorical context. We have seen that a heavy emphasis on oralism from the earliest days of Deaf education and a general hostility to sign language have hampered the emergence of a strong Deaf identity in Yantai, as is the case elsewhere in China. However, my analysis also reveals that the schools for the Deaf provided a context for Deaf children to meet and allowed Deaf networks to develop. The Deaf congregation grew, in part, when the early converts used these networks for their initial attempts at sharing the Christian message. The Deaf congregation provides a form of worship whereby sign

language is promoted, and a shared experience of signing helps to establish identity. A critical but contextualised perspective on the dominant discourses of disability and deafness is shared through worship and a particular aesthetics of worship aesthetics helps to strengthen membership bonds.

Of particular importance to our discussion here are the ways in which worship is contextualised by the Deaf congregation and how the use of sign language as a medium of worship encourages a re-assessment of the dominant approaches to worship which assume the presence of (vocalised) speech or song.<sup>20</sup> The Sunday Deaf worship gatherings serve as a vehicle for the promotion of sign language through which identity is formed and by which participants overcome the negative impacts of oralism. The gatherings of the Deaf congregation are one of the few spaces in which the members can both learn and use sign language. The context of worship brings people together as a group. The worship acts themselves promote the shared activity of signing in two main ways. Firstly, the use of text-based liturgy, songs and biblical passages are signed collectively, and as with Deaf worship in other contexts, the members of the congregation keep their eyes open in order to engage with the text thus facilitating a dialogue between the participants. The practice of following texts also helps participants to learn to translate the text into sign language rather than simply following the text via signed Chinese. Secondly, the inclusive nature of the worship gatherings whereby participants can interject to ask for explanation and clarification also promotes the shared activity of signing. It is through these acts of worship that a common signing vocabulary is learned.

The congregation has not developed its own distinct sign language and its worship gatherings are characterised by multiple forms of signing. There are two points for consideration here. Firstly, we recognise that sign language is a key element of Deaf identity (Breivik 2005). Secondly, it is not necessarily a shared common sign language which is the basis of Deaf identity, but rather the action of signing and the shared experience of signing which is important (see Kisch 2008; Friedner 2014). We have already established that Deaf people tend to be rather adept at communicating across sign languages and that the collective worship experience helps to bind participants together. It is entirely plausible that through time the congregation as a Deaf community will develop its own natural sign language, but this is clearly not the primary concern for the congregation.

Scholars of Deaf congregations in other contexts have argued in strong terms that in order for

Deaf worship to be fully meaningful for the participants, there should be no corporate signing or signed songs, no signing from the biblical text and no formalised liturgy based on textual sources (see Morris 2016, 134). While I agree that this may be the ideal in some contexts, I would suggest that in the particular context of our Chinese example, the following of texts in worship helps to locate the activity within a particular understanding of how the collective should function. Indeed, the idea of collectivism as a particularly important Deaf value has been put forward by a number of scholars (see Smit 2010; Kusters 2014), but we need to recognise that collectivism itself is based upon particular cultural understandings and therefore displays differently in different cultural contexts. The collective in Chinese contexts, emphasises conformity, structure and clear roles for group members, for example (see Liu 2017). I would argue that the forms of worship which have developed in this congregation help to provide a context where through following texts, members can more easily conform and understand the structures of the gathering and their role within it. It is the worship realised through shared cultural values which helps to strengthen group ties and encourage feelings of inclusion.

The worship gatherings promote more than the shared activity of signing. A contextualised interpretation of the Christian message and a particular discourse of disability are also learned. I could provide multiple examples of how sermons in this Deaf congregation delivered by Brother Xie and other members focus on the narrative of a fallen world, in which all people are spiritually disabled by sin and in which sin is the ‘real disability.’ It is only by God’s grace that this disability can be healed. This narrative directly challenges the dominant state and society discourse on disability which describes those with a physical disability as being ‘broken’ and in need of being ‘fixed’ to be like ‘normal’ people.<sup>21</sup> Further, this narrative challenges the discourse on deafness as a loss of hearing and instead suggests that deafness is, in fact, an inability to hear or listen to God spiritually.

Further, it is not solely the shared ability to sign, or having a particular contextualised understanding of the Christian message which helps to build and solidify the Yantai Deaf congregation’s identity. We have already noted that technology, mainly in the form of the digital projector, has had a transformative effect on the Sunday worship gatherings. The projector helps to facilitate communication and participation in these gatherings. The projection of texts and images helps to communicate the contents of sermons and allows the whole congregation to participate in the *collective* signing of liturgy, songs and biblical

passages and share in (and contribute to) the Christian message.

While the role of schools for the Deaf have received much attention in the scholarship for their importance in helping Deaf identity to develop, this case study of a Deaf congregation adds to our understanding of the ways in which Deaf communities can form in other contexts. We should certainly celebrate recent changes in Deaf education touched on very briefly in this article, especially the retreat from a strong adherence to oralism in China and elsewhere, and we should recognise the ways in which this will undoubtedly benefit Deaf children and help facilitate the development of a more robust Deaf identity in China at a time when it remains limited (Liang and Mason 2013, 27). We should not forget, however, that these changes will not directly benefit the generations of Deaf people who have already finished their formal schooling and who have largely been disenfranchised by that system – such as the majority of the members of the Deaf congregation analysed here. Belonging to this congregation fulfils a range of needs and has become ‘the place where Deaf people meet’ (see Smit 2010, 515c). Instead of talking about people as having the multiple identities of ‘Deaf’ and ‘Christian’ in Deaf churches as some have (Monaghan 1991), I would suggest that these two identities are very much intertwined in the Yantai congregation and are impossible to separate in any meaningful way.

It is also pertinent to ask what influence this Deaf congregation might have on the dominant discourses of disability and deafness in the future. Many of the core members of the congregation have good ties to the wider Deaf population and the different Deaf schools in Yantai. In 2010, I was invited to a ‘Deaf Gala’ which was mainly centred round performances by Deaf people. From being greeted on my arrival at the event, through the opening and closing speeches, and throughout the very powerful performances, I was struck by how many of the key figures were members of the Deaf congregation. Even the two translators who simultaneously signed and interpreted for both Deaf and hearers during the speeches delivered by local and provincial officials, were Christians and active members of the Deaf congregation. In a sense, then, they are activists in the wider socio-political milieu and are seeking to challenge perceptions of disability and deafness. What impact will they have and to what extent will their activism be effective in challenging official narratives on the deaf as ‘incomplete’?

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<sup>2</sup> The church is located near the centre of Yantai (Shandong province) in the People's Republic of China (PRC). The congregation was established by Chinese nationals independently of foreign missionaries. The church building was completed in 1922 and today it sits in a small compound, squashed between Shengli Road and newly-built high-rise apartments and offices.

<sup>3</sup> In keeping with the literature on deafness, I use deaf with a lower-case 'd' to refer to the audiological condition and use Deaf with an upper-case 'D' to refer to Deaf as a cultural label for those who use sign language as their first or preferred language.

<sup>4</sup> The Chinese state regards Catholicism and Protestantism as two distinct religions.

<sup>5</sup> There are three Sunday worship gatherings at Shengli Road Church: morning, afternoon and evening.

<sup>6</sup> It is common in Deaf communities for deaf people to produce sounds with their vocal chords (Nakamura 2006 xvi). This rarely occurs in this Deaf community because many of the members were 'trained' at school not to.

<sup>7</sup> Signed Chinese is signing which follows the syntax of written or spoken Chinese.

<sup>8</sup> These congregations have official permission to gather but are restricted to 'foreign' passport-holders only.

<sup>9</sup> See Kohrman, 2003 for an overview of the five official categories of disability.

<sup>10</sup> In 1983, Deng Pufang, son of Deng Xiaoping, established the China Welfare Fund which became the CDPF in 1988 with branches at provincial and municipal levels (Callaway 2000, 73). The China Deaf Association (*Zhongguo longren xiehui*), a 'quasi-governmental organization with nominal deaf leadership,' falls under the CDPF (Lytle *et al* 2006, 458c).

<sup>11</sup> For details of the establishment and development of the Yantai School for the Deaf, see Carter 1938; CFHR 1990, 490b; CYHR 1994, 1398a; CZHR 1994, 646a.

<sup>12</sup> This fingerspelling was a visual system for spelling the Romanised phonetic forms of Chinese characters.

<sup>13</sup> Several projects were conducted in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Wu *et al* 1999; Johnson 2003; Kruse and Yang 2009; He 2016). In 2007, the Chinese National Ministry of Education announced guidelines for more flexible teaching methods in Deaf education (Liang and Mason 2013).

<sup>14</sup> In 1958, The Deaf Welfare Association established the Sign Language Reform Council (*shouyu gaige weiyuanhui*) to create Chinese *pinyin* fingerspelling (a phonetic system used to express the pronunciation of each Chinese character) and develop a standardised Chinese Sign Language. A new fingerspelling alphabet was published in 1963 (Zhou 1980). Publications on CSL have not been very effective and have not generally been accepted by deaf communities because there has been little involvement of them in the CSL development process (Lin *et al* 2009, 330).

<sup>15</sup> Specific dates are unavailable as there are no written records.

<sup>16</sup> Sister Jiang seldom attends Sunday worship gatherings and is not a Deaf congregation leader. The Deaf leaders do approach her for advice on 'pastoral issues.'

<sup>17</sup> On my last visit to Yantai in 2015, the Deaf congregation had found new facilities in which to meet.

<sup>18</sup> These are 'northern' and 'southern' CSL (see Fischer and Gong 2010, 499). Taiwanese Sign Language (TSL) also has two main dialects (Ann 2003, 234).

<sup>19</sup> In the literature, I have come across only one other example of a Deaf Christian community in China. See Vermader *et al* (2018, 117-118) for a very brief description of a Deaf congregation lead by a Korean pastor in Shanghai who learned to sign. Unlike the Yantai congregation, however, this Deaf congregation is not Deaf-led.

<sup>20</sup> I fully recognise that the recent literature on the aesthetics of religion has sought to break down the mind-body dichotomy in approaches to religious practice and placed a renewed emphasis on the role of the body, materiality, sound and silence, etc. (see, for example, Meyer 2010). However, there is clearly a need to add Deaf aesthetics to the debate.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that a physical loss of hearing and other medically-determined 'disabilities' are regarded as things which could be rehabilitated by medical intervention (such as an operation) or healed via miraculous divine intervention. Brother Xie, for example, underwent operations on his ears as a child in an attempt to recover hearing loss and he sought prayer for healing after he converted to Christianity.